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ORPHANED

Four-year-old boy loses parents to drunk driver

By **TIM BARELA**

Photos by Tech. Sgt. **SAMUEL BENDET**

“It’s Mommy’s birthday!” exclaims 6-year-old Nathaniel Britt, unable to contain his excitement.

With a hop and a skip, he follows his grandparents, who are carrying a cake and 12 yellow balloons, out the back door of the house.

When they get on the patio, his

voice booms a hearty rendition of “Happy Birthday to You.” Then he takes a balloon into his miniature fist and lets it go, watching it slowly drift up into an overcast sky.

“I know God’s gonna grab that balloon and give it to Mommy,” Nathaniel says wistfully. “I just know it.”

Six-year-old Nathaniel Britt was only 4 when a drunk driver killed his parents and turned his life upside down.



At an age when most kids' main concerns are bartering for how many Oreos they get for snack or struggling to decide whether their parents are going to read "Where the Wild Things Are" or "The Cat in the Hat," Nathaniel is tragically different. A drunk driver made sure of that. April 5, 2009, the then 4-year-old was orphaned when 21-year-old Mario Hernandez-Rodriguez, after a night of drinking heavily, struck his parents who were riding a motorcycle together in Austin, Texas. Nathaniel's dad died instantly at the scene. His mom hung on for six days in an Austin hospital, but succumbed to her wounds as well.

Hernandez-Rodriguez? He fled on foot.

Police finally caught up with him almost five hours later. Even with the significant elapsed time, his blood alcohol level still measured a soaring .15, nearly twice the legal limit, according to court documents.

When Hernandez-Rodriguez ran off, he left behind carnage. Driving 65 mph the wrong way on East Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, his Chevy pickup truck careened off of a Mercedes, spun out of control, and then bowled into a half-dozen motorcycle riders from San Antonio who had attended a bike rally earlier that evening.

The first motorcycle he hit carried 36-year-old Tech. Sgt. Maurice Britt and 38-year-old Tech. Sgt. Audra Britt, both stationed at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. But he wasn't done. He also took the life of 42-year-old Keith Haliburton, a

banker.

All three rode with Cycles in Action,

a San Antonio-based motorcycle "gang" that fights for such causes as homeless children and Habitat for Humanity.

For most, the names of the people who died that day will be read and forgotten before they finish their first morning cup of coffee. That's not an accusation; not a statement meant to illicit

feelings of guilt. It's just a cold reality in a busy world that sees an average of nearly 150,000 people die each day, or roughly 100 per minute. Who could possibly mourn all of them? Three people killed on the back of a motorcycle quickly turn into just another tragic statistic.

But Nathaniel lost more than numbers that day.

First he lost Superman. Like most 4-year-olds, he still saw

On his mom's birthday Nov. 11, Nathaniel and his uncle (Staff Sgt. Aron Lee) get ready to send one of the 12 yellow balloons they release every year to heaven. Lee says his nephew enjoys this celebration, which makes him feel closer to his mom.



Courtesy photo

Claiming they were soul mates, Tech. Sgts. Maurice and Audra Britt had their lives and their love affair cut short when a drunk driver plowed into them and orphaned their son.

his dad as indestructible, capable of hurling his cackling little boy in the air like a football and catching him in mighty hands that Nathaniel always knew would be there to pick him up when he was down. "My daddy is the strongest man in the world!" Nathaniel would often boast proudly.

Then Nathaniel lost a miracle worker ... a woman capable of curing his every ailment with a magical kiss and tender hug. Skinned knees? No problem. His mom could transform his tears into giggles long before the blood dried. A nightmare? Her warm embrace would vanquish any monster his mind could dream up. "My mom is soooooo beautiful," he'd say adoringly.

In other words, Nathaniel lost his world.

Fortunately for him, his new reality includes living with loving grandparents, Audra's mom and dad, in San Antonio. Also close by are an uncle, three aunts and a cousin, who at 5 years old serves as a great playmate and distraction from his woes.

GP (Grandpa)

When the phone rang just after 4 on a Sunday morning, 57-year-old Ronald Lee instinctively knew something was wrong.

"I raised three kids and was a first sergeant for nearly 10 years in the Air Force," said Ronald, who retired as a master

sergeant June 1, 1997, after 24 years of service. “You learn that good news doesn’t come at 4 a.m.”

With his heart racing, he picked up the phone.

“Are you Ronald Lee?” a woman on the other end asked.

“Yes,” he responded warily.

“Are you Audra Britt’s father?” she continued.

“Yes,” he said.

“Is the baby with y ... ?”

Ronald cut her off. “What’s going on?” he asked.

She explained that Audra had been in a serious accident and gone through surgery to remove her spleen and a kidney.

“We’re on our way,” Ronald said. “What about Maurice?”

“I’m sorry; I’m not at liberty to say,” she replied.

“But I’m his father-in-law,” Ronald protested.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

By not telling him about Maurice, the woman had actually revealed everything, Ronald said. He called Maurice’s parents in Kentucky and gave them the phone number to the hospital.

Then Ronald and his wife, Carol, scrambled to load up their grandson, who they’d been babysitting. A groggy Nathaniel, still in his pajamas, asked, “Where we goin’ GP?”

“To see your mommy and daddy,” he answered.

As they drove to Austin, Maurice’s father called and confirmed Ronald’s worst thoughts.

His son-in-law didn’t make it.

Sadness, fear and despair gripped Ronald. He’d immediately liked Maurice when Audra had first introduced him.

“Maurice was a great provider, who took care of my daughter and made her happy,” he said. “He was an old-fashioned kind of guy, who asked me permission for my daughter’s hand in marriage. I never saw Audra so happy as when I walked her down the aisle on her wedding day. She really loved that man.”

When they finally arrived at the hospital a little over an hour after they’d left San Antonio, Ronald saw his firstborn child in a coma, hooked up to machines helping to keep her alive.

“I know what my eyes told me, but I never believed for a minute that she wouldn’t walk out of there,” he said. “I just prayed that if God had one more miracle left, I wouldn’t be mad if he bestowed it upon my daughter.”

And he had reason to believe. Audra was one of the people in the Pentagon Sept. 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked a passenger plane and crashed it into the building.

“It was scary, but the Good Lord had spared her then,” Ronald said.

But when Audra died after holding on for nearly a week following the hit-and-run, “I lost my mind,” he said. “I completely lost my mind.”

He fell into a deep depression, the anguish of a father whose duty was to protect his “little girl” — even if she’d turned 30-plus years.

“You never expect to bury your kids ...” he said solemnly as his voice trailed off.

For days, he mourned all he’d lost. Her passion, her loyalty, her laugh. A Pittsburgh native, all Ronald’s children were born with Pittsburgh Steeler black and gold blood coursing through their veins. But perhaps none shared his passion for his hometown’s professional football team more than Audra.

“She loved the Steelers; I created a monster,” he said with a chuckle. “One of our best days together was watching Pittsburgh win the Super Bowl in ’08. Then, of course, she couldn’t wait to get to work to talk some smack.”

These fond memories tortured Ronald.

“I was angry ... vindictive. I was vengeful,” he said of Hernandez-Rodriguez, who in February 2010 was sentenced to 20 years in prison for intoxication manslaughter and another five for fleeing the scene. “Early on, if I had been near Audra’s killer ...

“But that’s not who I am. That’s not who Audra was. And that’s not what she needed me to be for Nathaniel.”

Ironically, it turned out to be his grandson who helped him to snap out of his funk.

“One day he said, ‘GP, why you cryin’?’ Nathaniel had never seen me cry before, so I’m sure it shook him up,” Ronald said. “I looked down at him, and then something just clicked inside me. I realized how selfish I was being. I’d lost a daughter, but he’d lost his mother and father. His whole world had been turned upside down.”



With a tear streaming down his cheek, retired Master Sgt. Ronald Lee said he never expected to outlive any of his children. But he saw Audra buried April 21, 2009, at Fort Sam, Texas. Above, Anika Lee, Nathaniel’s aunt, takes a moment to collect herself before continuing to talk about losing her best friend — older sister Audra — and the void it has left in her life.



Following in the footsteps of his mom and his grandpa, Nathaniel is learning to be a die-hard Pittsburgh Steeler fan.

Aunt Nikki

Anika Lee, Audra’s younger sister by one year, found out about the accident via a phone call from her mom. Living in Houston at the time, she began the two-hour drive to Austin.

“My mom’s voice didn’t give anything away,” said Anika,

who more often goes by Nikki. “I’m sure they didn’t want to tell me too much because they knew I would panic — yes, I’m *that* person in my family, the emotional one.”

She knew Audra was hurt, but hadn’t heard anything about Maurice. She tried to call him on his cell phone and couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t answer. So

“My sister had been full of energy and life; she never stopped moving. To see her just laying there motionless ...”

she called the hospital to try to track him down.

A little while later, her phone rang. A nurse told her that Maurice had died at the scene.

“I pulled over to the side of the road and started freaking out,” she said. “I couldn’t believe he was gone. He was Audra’s soul mate. They were so good together.”

Nikki calmed down enough to reach Austin.

“It was overwhelming,” she said. “My sister had been full of energy and life; she never stopped moving. To see her just laying there motionless ...”

Distraught, Nikki fainted in the hallway of the hospital.

“My sister was my best friend; we were two peas in a pod,” Nikki said. “We’d talk every single day and e-mail each other. She’d tell me funny stories about Nathaniel — something he said or did — and we’d laugh till it hurt. She was a big part of my life.”

DRUNK DRIVING FACTS

- About 30 percent of Americans are involved in an alcohol-related crash during their lifetime.
- The highest rates of drunk driving occur among drivers aged 21-24.
- Nearly 75 percent of fatal crashes between midnight and 3 a.m. involve alcohol.
- On average, someone in the United States is killed by a drunk driver every 40 minutes.

— National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Nikki said she sometimes still reaches for the phone to call Audra. She always realizes her error before dialing. “I still feel the void,” she said, wiping a tear as it rolled to the corner of her lips.

But she does still get to see glimpses of her sister ... through her nephew.

“He is a constant reminder of her,” Aunt Nikki said. “Not in looks — physically he takes after his father. But he has his mother’s spirit, her inquisitive mind and her infectious laugh.”

Uncle Face

Staff Sgt. Aron Lee, 33, was stationed at Cannon AFB, N.M., when his mom called him and told him that Audra and Maurice were in the hospital.

“My first thought was of my nephew and how he was going to grow up without a dad.”

“My mom was calm, so my initial reaction was they were probably a little banged up — maybe a broken arm or something,” he said.

Thirty minutes later, another call from his mother shattered those thoughts.

“She told me that Audra was in intensive care, and Reece didn’t make it,” he said.

He went numb as the words slowly sunk in.

“My first thought

was of my nephew and how he was going to grow up without a dad,” said Aron, who is married and has a daughter just a year younger than Nathaniel. “It broke my heart, and I knew I’d have to be there for him and my sister.”

So he and his family loaded up the car and drove to Austin as fast as they could.

“When I saw Audra, I couldn’t believe it,” he said. “She was always the life of the party. She was always the first one on the dance floor and the last to leave.”

Aron sunk down heavily into a chair near his sister. He looked into the nurse’s eyes and pleaded with her.

“Please make my sister get up,” he said, sobbing. The nurse burst into tears.

When Aron left the room, Nathaniel spotted him and with a big grin hollered, “Uncle Face!” (Audra, being the practical joker, had taught her son to call Aron “Uncle Face” because “Face” is his stage name. He moonlights as a hip hop and gospel singer.)

“Nathaniel gave me a big hug, and then saw I was crying,” Aron said. “He patted me on the shoulder and said, ‘It’ll be OK.’ I knew right then and there that I’d have to pull myself together and man up for his sake.”

Uncle Face grabbed his cell phone and asked his nephew to sing his ABCs into it. Then he took the recording and played it for his sister over and over again.

“I read somewhere that people in comas can hear you,” he said. “I thought maybe if she heard Nathaniel’s voice, she would wake up.”

But a few days later when doctors informed the family that Audra was brain dead, those hopes were dashed. They made the gut-wrenching decision to remove her from life support.

Aron, however, wasn’t ready to let his sister go. When the doctor and nurse tried to enter the ICU room to disconnect Audra from the life-preserving machines, her baby brother blocked the door.

“No!” he yelled, the tears streaming down his face. “No!” His father gently grabbed him by the shoulder and said, “It’s time, son; it’s time.”

Aron relented and watched helplessly as the nurse, one-by-one, disconnected the machines that had kept his sister alive. He saw Audra take her last breath.

“My dad was broken,” Aron said. “I’d never seen him like that. He came to me and said, ‘Son, I’m going to need you to be there for me.’”

With assistance from his Air Force family, Aron was able to get a humanitarian assignment to Lackland AFB so he could help his parents raise Nathaniel. He’s still there, assigned to the 737th Training Group as a training manager, and only minutes from where his sister and brother-in-law worked.



“Uncle Face” — or Staff Sgt. Aron Lee — plays football with Nathaniel in the back yard. Lee got a humanitarian assignment to Lackland AFB, Texas, to help his parents raise Nathaniel after the tragic deaths of the boy’s mom and dad.



Grammy and GP lay a big kiss on their grandson while relaxing on a backyard swing. Nathaniel’s parents appointed Ronald and Carol Lee as their son’s legal guardians. Raising Nathaniel has helped them deal with the grief of losing their daughter and son-in-law.

Grammy

Carol Lee walked into an empty bathroom at the hospital. She had just found out that a drunk driver caused this heartache.

While everyone else around her fell apart, she had held it together. But now alone, she cried uncontrollably. “Why!” she screamed. Then she prayed for God to give her the strength for what was to come. For while the rest of her family believed Audra would wake from her coma, Carol knew otherwise. Call it a mother’s intuition. She simply knew she’d never hear her daughter’s sweet voice again or gaze upon her radiant smile.

She remembered when Audra gave birth to her first grandchild. Carol had traveled to Hickam AFB, Hawaii, where Audra was stationed at the time. Her due date was sometime in December, but Nathaniel wouldn’t wait. He was born on Thanksgiving Day.

“When Audra was in labor, she kept telling me she couldn’t have the baby because it hurt too much,” Carol said smiling. “I told her, ‘Well, you can’t keep that baby in your stomach.’ But Audra always was stubborn. She ended up having a C-section.”

After such a rough start, Carol said Audra took to being a mother like a duck takes to water. She was a natural.

“She was a great mom, and she loved that boy with all her heart,” she said. “And he loved her back.”

So imagine the excruciatingly painful moment when it fell to “Grammy” to tell Nathaniel that his mother had perished.

“Nathaniel, Grammy has something to tell you,” she said.

“Is it about Mommy? Is she going to be OK?” Nathaniel asked anxiously. Then, more quietly, he asked, “... Did Mommy go to heaven with my daddy?”

Carol knew that Nathaniel was too bright a boy to beat around the bush. She decided to give it to him straight.

Tears flowed out of Nathaniel’s big brown eyes.

“Why did both of them have to go see God?” he asked with a shaky voice.

Carol held her grandson tightly.

“Can we go home now?” he asked.

“Yes,” Grammy replied.

Nathaniel

Today, Nathaniel has adjusted to his “new world.” He’s one of the most popular kids at school — the “life of the party,” just like his mom. GP and Grammy do their best to fill in for his mom and dad, fixing him his favorite meals and listening intently to his never-ending stories. He spends some nights with Uncle Face to give his grandparents a break from trying to keep up with a 6-year-old who has more energy than a lightning bolt. And Aunt Nikki is always nearby to read him a story or give him a squeeze.

But Nathaniel hasn’t forgotten his parents ... not even close.

Some nights, he still cries himself to sleep or wakes up with nightmares.

But there are plenty of good times with

lots of family members to love him and provide happy memories, like the day they celebrated Audra’s birthday.

That night when it was time to go to bed, Nathaniel sleepily protested, “But I’m not tired.”

With a knowing smile, Grammy said softly, “OK, you don’t have to go to sleep; you can just lay here for a bit.”

Then Nathaniel yawned and his eyes began to roll into the back of his head. Groggily, he said, “I’m going to shut my eyes now so I can look at Mommy and Da ...”

Sweet dreams, Nathaniel. ... Sweet dreams ...